

HEART OF THE VALLEY
anti-capitalist
bookfair



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THE FINAL STRAW RADIO

A chat with organizers of the 2024 Heart of the Valley Anticapitalist Bookfair which ran its first iteration in Corvallis, Oregon from January 19-21st. A zine of their experiences will appear on that blog soon.

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TFSR: So we're joined by some of the organizers from the 2024 Heart of the Valley Anti-Capitalist Bookfair, thank you so much for joining us. Would you mind sharing your names—any names, doesn't have to be your name, just a name—gender pronouns, or other info that you'd like to help out the audience with?

A: Howdy, I'm A, and I use she/her pronouns.

B: I am B, and I use she/they pronouns.

A: Thank you so much for having us. Long time, first time, etc...

TFSR: Ah, shucks. Thank you. Appreciate that. Yeah, could you tell us a bit about Corvallis, things like its size, its layout, economy, location, just sort of set the stage for the listeners?

A: Yeah, so I would say the Corvallis is not totally dissimilar from Asheville. We are a pretty small, rural community located in Oregon's Willamette Valley. We have a population of about 60,000 people. Corvallis is kind of located on a little bit off the I-5 corridor. So if you think about where Portland and Eugene are, we're more or less right between them. So we are sort of surrounded by simultaneously like some of the biggest, most left-wing cities in America, as well as like a lot of a very, very, rural right wing, kind of timber and farm communities. Corvallis is a college town. We have Oregon State University here, and that kind of has made it so that Corvallis is, I guess, pretty liberal, left-wing, but not entirely. Yeah, it's definitely a smaller place. But it has lots of elements of left-wing and alternative culture that have been present in maybe lesser capacities than like Portland and Eugene but have been present for a very long time. Do you have anything you want to add to that?

B: I guess specifics on how the the city iss chopped up. It's kind of like trisected. There's a Southtown and downtown and a Northtown with suburbs in between all that. And you can kind of see economic disparities between all that, like a lot of the richer people live in the north, and then, you know, working class homies are in the south. That's kind of typical with a lot of cities, but I guess it's kind of important to mention.

TFSR: Cool. How much sway does the university play in the city? I'm sure it's, like, kind of oversized, right?

A: Oh yeah, massively. The college kind of runs the town, you know, and does all

kinds of fucked up shit to its workers and the city at large. There's I believe three unions at the university actively fighting, and many of us like the workers there live on poverty wages. So that's kind of a big struggle that is coming up the pipeline for a lot of those of us who are organizing out here.

TFSR: And is it—university aside, or including—but is it a pretty diverse place? Is it pretty white? I know that a lot of towns and cities in the north-west either have, like, large Native populations there, or have a lot of folks from East Asia who have settled in the area, or from Latin America. How would you [describe it]?

B: Yeah, it's pretty aggressively white. I'd say a lot of the diversity comes from the school and folks coming from where they're at wherever they're from, but other than that, you might find some pockets of, I don't know... I know some Guatemalan families that stay here. I know some families from China here. But it's majority white.

TFSR: Cool, thank you. Context. So I'd love to hear a thumbnail sketch of what was offered at the book fair this January, like who attended and what sort of things happened?

A: Yeah, so the book fair was sick. We took a lot of inspiration from ACAB book fair in Asheville. That was kind of our primary model. And we organized it not so much as one book fair event, but as a sort of three day long festival across a bunch of different venues. So we had, I think, six different venues, over a dozen events. We had three different parties. We had multiple shows, we had workshops, we had book talks... Yeah, all kinds of different stuff. It was super, super cool. And I think was like a really, really positive thing for our area.

TFSR: Yeah, that's really exciting. And I'm sure that Asheville organizers will be really stoked to hear that. Well, you've kind of talked about how the city has, and surrounding communities have, some sort of like radical temperament to them, and have for a while. There is an existent radical community in the area, and being between those two other cities that have a long-standing politically left flavor, I guess, is not disconnected. Yeah, but I wonder what goals you had for the book fair in terms of relating to ongoing organizing, or spaces, or community in the area and sort of maybe even cementing ties between those three cities.

A: I think that that was a huge goal. And just finding a physical space where a lot of

people from a lot of different tendencies and backgrounds could be together and interact and forge friendships and working relationships. I think that was huge. One thing that's really awesome about Corvallis, I think, is because we are sort of a smaller population, we aren't really subject to a lot of the really nasty sectarianism and drama that pervades the scenes in Portland and Eugene and other places in the state. So you know, it was kind of a nice, neutral ground where I think a lot of different people who have different backgrounds and tendencies could get to interface with each other. And also get to know our local organizing, because I think a lot of what we do locally is very cut off from statewide networks, because so many organizers from urban centers really only focus on urban centers and don't really ever look to rural places for inspiration or collaboration.

TFSR: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. That's kind of similar to what... I mean, there's definitely competitions for space or, you know, feels that come up in Asheville around alphabet soup leftist organizations, like PSL, taking a lot of space and doing it badly. But even just kind of off the cuff, there's no, among anti-authoritarians, no strong organization that is... there's no Black Rose chapter here. Actually I don't think there's an IWW chapter here at the moment. And I've seen over the like the last decade and a half or so of living here, that as opposed to growing up in the outer reaches of the Bay Area, you would see whatever leftist organizations, peace and justice centers, Marxist political parties, whatever, all sort of taking space, and that takes a lot of your your head and it kind of divides the lines in the community. So it's nice if in a smaller place where people have less capacity, they they're kind of forced to get along with each other a little bit better and work through disagreements, right?

B: Yeah, I think that's pretty accurate.

TFSR: So I know you all have a zine coming out about the first book fair, which seems pretty informative, from what I've seen of it. Not to hash out all the details that folks can later read on their own, but what are some of the takeaway lessons that you had from this first one? Things that worked well, or things that you'd do different?

B: Really good communication with your venues, because if you want to have events again, you might want to maintain very frequent relationships. Even if you're not doing book fairs every year, you're going to be doing different types of events. And this can work in kind of both ways where it can open up really awesome relationships with places that you might have never been before. But it can

also be a point of criticism for how you're communicating during the book fair for how it might go after.

A: Yeah, I think another kind of takeaway that we received critique on—because after our book fair, we put out a survey and we kind of asked our community like, “Hey, we think we did this really cool thing, but tell us how we fucked up, how can we do better next time.” And another thing that people talked a lot about was the different sort of speakers and stuff that we had, because we had a bunch of workshops that we just kind of, we put we put an application out into the universe that was like, “Hey, radical people who want to put on a workshop, you can do it.” And we accepted more or less every workshop application we had gotten. And pretty much all of those workshops were run by white people. And also it should be said that for some of them people who attended felt they were just kind of boring or not relevant or did not really represent the politics that they were wanting to learn about, especially. That's something we got criticism on from new people to the left who were like, “I'm trying to get involved, and I'm stuck in a very weird, intense theoretical discussion that I have no understanding of.” So I think we're really going to try to do more curation of like content in the future and less kind of laissez-faire whoever applies gets to gets to do something.

TFSR: So to touch on those two, chronologically, I guess... With the reaching out to the venues, is that because venues will end up forgetting that they told you that you've got a date saved and then give it away or because of capacity questions or the nature of the event? What sort of miscommunication was experienced there.

B: I think it was a lot of the places that we frequent and have events at before the book fair we already had a pretty great relationship with. So while it was happening, it was, at least for some places that we were at, expected to be doing a similar sized event, and there was a misunderstanding of scale, I think. So now, when we bring, I don't know, 100+ people into these places where we're doing like maybe 20-50 on a weekend or something, it's like, whoa, this is like a different ball game here. So I guess being more clear about your group's scale. Also getting contracts, if you have a place in mind for making your book fair happen, just so there's some guarantees and some some lines drawn, just making sure you don't cross any boundaries with with where you're booking.

A: Yeah, we also just didn't like lots of little, tiny things that got messed up, just like miscommunication about where to put XYZ thing away. Are we are we using your printer too much, stuff like that. And ultimately, if we want to do something that is

like an institution in our community, we have to work to foster those relationships, I think. A lot of those little tiny details and courtesies that we would be engaged in otherwise get kind of lost when you're hosting this giant thing and there's a couple hundred people in a room that you have to facilitate all the things for, so I think that just kind of slips away.

TFSR: Yeah, that makes that makes a lot of sense. Did you have a sense of how many people were going to show up beforehand? I can't imagine how you would have really. It's not like everyone's going to RSVP. Although you did have like a housing signup, right?

B: That is true. Yeah, I think everybody had a different answer for how many people we thought were going to show up. A and I thought it was going to be higher, or at least slightly higher than the turnout we ended up having. But most people said that the scale was going to be lower than the folks that ended up showing up.

A: I mean, we definitely knew that it was going to be really quite big, just because of the sheer amount of engagement we were getting on social media and just the amount of different people that we knew would be in attendance because they were going to be tabling or doing workshops or whatever else. But yeah, it did kind of take us by surprise. We also, in the response forms that we received, kind of got a criticism that some of the spaces were really, really tightly packed. We did a film screening, and it was standing room only, and people had to, like, sit on each other's laps, and were literally falling out of the room that we had it in. And then similarly with workshops. And we really need to be thoughtful of how many people will actually show up to this and we definitely are probably going to invest in bigger venues and spaces next year when we do it.

TFSR: Yeah, and and considering the time of the year when this occurred, when the weather wouldn't be that happy for people to be opening the doors and just kind of standing outside. That makes a lot of sense. With the presenter curation stuff, did you, or do you have any plans—assuming that you're going to have a next one—for taking a survey from people of what kinds of things they'd like to see, either just out into the universe or among the tablers? Like people that are going to be invested in being there? Do you have any thoughts on that?

B: I think that would be a great approach for before we put out our “who wants to do a workshop” call, because I feel like we started with asking folks what they could do instead of what they wanted to do, or asking our “audience” what they would

want to see out of a workshop. And in that regard, we were able to vet a lot of our workshops a little bit better, because we were like, oh, we know that these people do this thing, and they're down to do workshop on self-defense. We understood that people have their specialties—of folks we knew personally—and that was just an easier process. But I think next year, it would behoove us to put out a call of, like, what are some things folks saw last year for the workshops that they want to see again, and then what are some new things that people might be interested in, and maybe even adding some examples too. Yeah, I think that that'd be a great idea.

TFSR: Yeah, so I mean, do you do you have plans for subsequent book fair? Is it too soon to talk? I mean, this only just happened a month and a half ago-ish.

B: It's potentially a little too soon to talk. But I think we had some really awesome bones from this one that we're going to apply to the next one. And with just applying the bits and critiques and experiences that we have.

A: I think we're definitely going to do a next one. I think the current plan is to shoot for fall of 2025, because the weather was so gnarly for our thing that we don't want to do it exactly a year later. So our thought is kind of do it during fall and maybe provide a bunch of the new students who are coming back with an awesome nexus point to plug in with a bunch of local organizing and see what cool radical stuff is happening in Corvallis.

B: I also want to add context that, actually the week of the book fair, we had an ice storm here and it completely froze over the city, which canceled a lot of folks' plans, but it was still awesome turnout, considering.

TFSR: Yeah, that's great. With the Asheville Book Fair last year, being that it happened in the high heat of August, in the south, in a rain forest—it was not freezing temperatures, and it was not COVID peaks or anything like that—but it was hot as shit. So the windows were open, and it also ended up raining super hard throughout it, to the point that people inside a venue sometimes could not really be heard by the audiences. If you listen to any of the recordings that are up on the website for the radio show, you can hear like, when Modibo Kadalie is speaking, it's just pounding rain. You can hear cars passing by and splashing water because the windows are open because it's so hot. It was ridiculous. I guess you can't really control that sort of stuff. But yeah, that makes a lot of sense to try to move it to a time of year when you're not going to have to deal with ice storms for sure. Do you have

any social media or web presence where we can point listeners to check out a list of what was happening during the book fair or your announcements and stuff or where the zine is going to come out? Are there any places online where this year's event are documented?

A: Yeah, our website is hotvbookfair.noblogs.org, and that's where you'll see our full plenary of events. We will also put the zine there when we publish it. All of the social media went through a group in town that we do event planning stuff through called Fuchsia, so it's on Instagram @fuchsia.corv.

TFSR: Yeah. I keep harping on the zine, but it was something that I was hoping the Asheville folks would put together as a documentation of the process just so someone could pick it up and take it back to Athens, Georgia or Greensboro or Knoxville and say we want to have a radical or anarchist book fair maybe we don't want to be starting from scratch, and then be able to look at the zine and say to yourself, "Let's make a list of the resources that we've already got. What venues do we have connections with? What bands are around here?" It seems like a really useful. I don't know if it's designed for perpetuity for Corvallis, or if it's a little starter for other communities, or what folks are thinking about that.

A: That's definitely like kind of the goal that we had. I think that we were really successful in the organizing that we did, and I feel like we brought a lot of things to this space that other book fairs could have really used to be better, things that I would have liked to see in other book fairs that I've been to. I would hope that folks do sort of see that and maybe consider implementing stuff into their own projects, because I want more radical spaces to be happening across the PNW and wherever, and if we can help that happen that would be sick.

B: Yeah, based on where the zine is at right now it's pretty replicable in a lot of places, and we acknowledge that it's not going to look the same as the one we have here, and that's completely okay. And it should be like that. More radical spaces, let's see it happen.

A: Yeah, the final thing that I will say to your listeners is we didn't really have any experience at all doing any event of this scale really ever. And if you want to see this thing happen in your town, you can put together something really cool by getting together a couple of your friends and really throwing some effort at something. It's not that hard to do. You can make really sick stuff out of thin air. So I really recommend y'all try to do it if you can.

TFSR: Yeah, and the people that put on these events are often accessible. The Victoria Book Fair was going on for at least a few years. I don't know if it still is. But starting in 2020, they were doing a huge amount of content online, and a lot of that audio is now available in From Embers podcast feed. There's a lot of different ways to do it, and depending on the size of what you've got available and what you want to see, it could definitely look a lot of ways, which is great.

Well, A and B, thank you so much for having this conversation and for the event, and hopefully, I'll be able to make it out next time it happens. It'd be fun.

A: Thank you so much for having us.

B: Thanks for having us. Better see you there.

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